

# Unlocking the Dynamics of Social Entrepreneurship: An Investigation in Northwest Ireland Research Method Paper

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this research is to examine the establishment and development of social enterprises and entrepreneurs in Northwest Ireland. Using a multi-method approach which combines qualitative and quantitative methods, the research aims to understand the dynamics, challenges, and motivations behind social entrepreneurship. The research design commences with quantitative data collection and analysis, which subsequently informs and enriches the qualitative phase. In the first phase, the research applies a shallow cases analysis to develop the questions for the subsequent survey and interviews. A self-administered online questionnaire, facilitated through a snowball sampling approach, captures quantitative data. The collaboration with regional development entities bolsters the survey process, aiming to construct a demographic profile of social entrepreneurs. The goal of this phase is to gather information that will help explain and describe the motives and difficulties faced by social entrepreneurs. The second phase unfolds through in-depth interviews, engaging social entrepreneurs and stakeholders, including government departments. The aim is to fully understand the formation and evolution process. To understand what factors, impact on this process and how they overcome these events. The research uses a methodological toolkit that includes theme analysis for qualitative insights and SPSS for quantitative data analysis. This multi-method research contributes to the growing of literature on social entrepreneurship, particularly in regional contexts. The findings extend implications for various stakeholders, including government agencies, higher education institutions, and intermediaries actively involved in supporting and enhancing the impact of social enterprises. Essentially, the research provides a context-specific and comprehensive explanation of how social entrepreneurship has developed in Northwest Ireland. In summary, the research effectively advocates for a nuanced knowledge of the dynamics of social entrepreneurship in regional contexts by capturing the richness and complexity of the subject matter through the well-chosen use of a multi-method approach. The results contribute to scholarly discourse and provide practical insights for those committed to promoting social innovation and bringing about constructive changes in society.

**Keywords:** Social entrepreneurship, Ireland, Multi-Method approach, Quantitative data, Qualitative insights, Motivations, Challenges, Thematic analysis

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, social entrepreneurship has emerged as a powerful force for positive social and environmental change, with individuals and organisations alike harnessing innovative business models to address pressing societal challenges. Social enterprises play a vital role in driving economic growth and fostering community well-being in the Northwest of Ireland. As such, it is imperative for policymakers, practitioners, and academics to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping the successful development of social enterprises in this region. While existing literature has delved into aspects such as societal impact, community engagement, and government relations (Choi, Lee, & Hur, 2021), there remains a notable gap in empirical evidence regarding the size, scope, and tangible economic and social contributions of social enterprises in the Irish context (Choi & Park, 2021). To address this gap, this study aims to shed light on the impact, dynamics, and contributions of social enterprises, as well as the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem in the Northwest.

Drawing on previous research that explored social enterprise practitioners' perspectives on business support provision, this study will focus on the pre-startup, startup, and established stages of social enterprise development. By doing so, it seeks to provide policymakers and decision-makers across the local entrepreneurial ecosystem with valuable insights into how best to support the establishment and growth of social enterprises. The overarching goal of this research is to investigate the formation and evolution of social enterprises and entrepreneurs in the Northwestern region, with specific objectives outlined as follows:

1. To build a demographic profile of entrepreneurs.
2. "4P" Social Entrepreneurs for People, Profit, Planet and Place.
3. Identify the motivations and challenges they encounter at each stage of formation and evolution.
4. Identify the importance of local entrepreneurial ecosystem in the process.
5. Outline the importance of intermediaries, hubs, HEIs to the process.

## **2. Background**

This study adopts a multi-method approach, primarily focusing on primary research. The research design entails quantitative data collection as the initial stage of the process, followed by qualitative data collection. Literature review findings and quantitative data analysis results will inform the subsequent qualitative phase. This sequential design ensures a clear and systematic approach to analysis and reporting, as advocated by Creswell and Báez (2020). The insights gleaned from the initial quantitative phase will guide the qualitative data collection process, particularly in profiling social entrepreneurs and enterprises and exploring their motivations and challenges in formation and growth.

The qualitative data collection phase involves conducting in-depth interviews with social enterprises, entrepreneurs, and stakeholders, including government departments. The use of semi-structured interviews with a carefully selected group of social entrepreneurs is essential to gaining deeper insights into the formation and evolution process. By integrating findings from the literature review and the initial quantitative phase, the research aims to develop more accurate predictions and insights.

The research employs SPSS for quantitative data analysis and thematic analysis for qualitative data analysis. SPSS facilitates the statistical analysis of quantitative data, while thematic analysis enables the identification and interpretation of patterns in qualitative data. This dual-method approach ensures a systematic and comprehensive understanding of the research questions. Thematic analysis helps uncover the various motivations, challenges, and dynamics of social enterprises in the Northwest. Themes identified in the literature and the quantitative phase inform interview questions, ensuring alignment with predetermined research objectives.

Semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility while maintaining a focus on predetermined themes. Stakeholders, including government departments, are interviewed to gain insights into the support landscape and ecosystem differences, addressing research objective 5. These interviews contribute to understanding the distinctions between the general ecosystem and the social enterprise ecosystem in the Northwest.

In summary, this research employs a rigorous multi-method approach to investigate the formation and evolution of social enterprises in the Northwest. By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, the study aims to provide valuable insights for stakeholders, including government agencies, HEIs, and intermediaries, to better support social enterprise development in the region.

## **3. Phases**

This research employs a multi-method approach with quantitative data collection, including shallow cases analysis, and qualitative data collection through in-depth interviews. This approach allows a comprehensive exploration of social enterprises in the Northwest.

### **3.1 Phase 1: Quantitative Data Collection**

The quantitative phase involves analysing shallow cases to establish a foundational framework. This phase aims to gather background information on social enterprises and entrepreneurs, including demographics and motivations, to address research objectives 1-3. Shallow case analysis serves as a guiding compass, facilitating a deeper understanding of the specifics of social enterprises. Employing a snowball sampling approach, participants are encouraged to complete an online questionnaire and share it with others. The study benefits from the support of organizations such as Donegal Local Development Company, Inishowen Development Company, and Donegal Women in Business, enhancing participant engagement.

Through this quantitative phase, valuable descriptive and explanatory data will be obtained, contributing to the profiling of social entrepreneurs. Descriptive data will aid in understanding the characteristics of the sample, while explanatory data will delve into motivations, challenges, and various influencing factors. This approach ensures a focused exploration, allowing survey and interview questions to extract meaningful information. Overall, the quantitative phase plays a crucial role in addressing research objectives 1-4, providing insights into the multifaceted dynamics of social enterprise development.

### **3.2 Phase 2: Qualitative Data Collection**

To fully understand the thoughts, feelings, or human participants, it is very important that qualitative analysis is undertaken. For this reason, it is vital that semi-structured in-depth interviews are conducted with a selection of the social enterprises/entrepreneurs to fully understand the formation and evolution process. To understand

what factors, impact on this process and how they overcome these events. These findings would help Government agencies, HEIs, intermediaries to understand how best to support these enterprises. As previously outlined in literature, this is an emergent area in which additional research is necessary (Qingqing, Collins and Ranabahu, 2021). The qualitative phase will provide necessary detail and insight. Both literature and the findings from phase one will allow the development of predetermined themes, and a theme sheet enabling the semi-structured approach to interviewing (Saunders et al. 2019). The survey and interview questions will be designed based on the literature, previous studies, and shallow cases analysis. SPSS will be utilized to analysis the quantitative data and thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analysing, organising, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

#### **4. Challenges and Solutions**

Addressing challenges such as participant availability is achieved through flexible scheduling and collaboration with local development organizations like Donegal Local Development Company and Inishowen Development Company. These partnerships provide crucial support for participant engagement. Regular communication with supervisors enables prompt resolution of unforeseen challenges. It is important to note that challenges identified in the research are diverse and stage dependent.

Ethical considerations play a pivotal role in the research process. Consent is obtained from participants, and measures are taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. The study strictly adheres to ethical guidelines, with a focus on safeguarding the well-being and rights of participants. This includes obtaining informed consent, maintaining data confidentiality, and treating participants with respect. These ethical practices are fundamental to maintaining the integrity and credibility of the research.

#### **5. Research Contributions**

The research aims to offer practical support to social entrepreneurs by elucidating the available support within the local entrepreneurial ecosystem. Additionally, it addresses the needs of key decision-makers by providing insights into the motivations, resources, and challenges encountered by social entrepreneurs at various stages of their journey. The study emphasizes crucial elements of the ecosystem, areas requiring improvement, and the roles of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), local intermediaries, and regional hubs in fostering growth and sustainability. By examining these factors, the research seeks to inform policies and practices that promote the advancement of social entrepreneurship in the region.

The significance of mentorship programs, access to funding networks, and collaborative spaces within the local ecosystem is underscored in the study. Areas for enhancement include improving resource accessibility for social enterprises, streamlining regulatory support, and expanding networking opportunities. These elements are identified based on the expressed experiences and needs of social entrepreneurs.

HEIs, local intermediaries, and regional hubs play distinct yet complementary roles in supporting social enterprise growth. HEIs contribute through tailored research, training, and educational programs. Local intermediaries, such as business development agencies, facilitate connections and provide targeted assistance. Regional hubs serve as collaborative platforms, promoting networking and knowledge exchange. The research explores how these institutions can synergize efforts to cultivate an optimal ecosystem for social enterprises.

#### **6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research has illuminated the intricate network of relationships, resources, and support mechanisms essential for the success of social enterprises in the Northwest region. By comprehensively analysing the roles of higher education institutions, local intermediaries, and regional hubs, valuable insights have been gleaned regarding the factors contributing to the sustainability and expansion of social entrepreneurship. The collaborative efforts and tailored support provided by these entities are pivotal in fostering an environment conducive to the thriving of social enterprises and their lasting impact on society.

Moving forward, stakeholders must capitalize on these findings to inform policies, practices, and initiatives aimed at further fortifying the entrepreneurial ecosystem. By doing so, they can empower social entrepreneurs to spearhead positive change not only in the Northwest region but also beyond its borders.

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